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Institutionalized Individuality: Death Practices and Afterlife Beliefs in Unity Church, Unitarian Universalism, and Spiritualism in Santa Barbara

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by

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ABSTRACT

Institutionalized Individuality: Death Practices and Afterlife Beliefs in Unity Church, Unitarian Universalism, and Spiritualism in Santa Barbara

by

Courtney L. Applewhite

Both scholars and the larger public are becoming more interested in death rituals and afterlife beliefs as demonstrated by emerging scholarly panels and conferences on the topic and popular books that are topping the best-seller lists. This interest coincides with polls that show increasing numbers of nonreligious people in the United States. Where do people who fall into this "nonreligious" category—including those that are "spiritual but not religious," unaffiliated, atheist, agnostic, and others—turn when considering ontological questions about death and afterlife? One possibility is toward American liberal religious institutions such as Unity Church, Unitarian Universalism, and Spiritualism. Through ethnographic research at these three institutions in Santa Barbara, I examine the way in which the individual and the group interact to understand afterlife beliefs and death rituals. Unity Church of Santa Barbara, the Unitarian Society of Santa Barbara, and the Spiritualist Church of the Comforter each has flexible guidelines and leadership training that invites the integration of personal afterlife beliefs and death rituals within an institutionally agreed-upon framework. These are sites of meaning-making for those that are religious or "spiritual but not religious." Here, beliefs about the afterlife and expectations surrounding death rituals are actively explored through interactions with other members, ritual attendance, and personal experiences of loss.

Introduction

Sitting with Doris, a warm, quick-witted woman in her 80s, in her home atop a hill in Montecito, she shared with me her memories of her late husband Dennis. Dennis had died seven months prior and Doris spoke with me about their life together. She explained their decision to attend the Unitarian Society nine years ago. We also talked about Dennis' death and what that meant for her. Doris' was my longest interview; finally, I asked how she thought about her own death now. She laughed, as she did often, and said,

> Things happen and it falls apart, you know. So, I can't worry about that now. I'm going to enjoy it now while I'm here and we'll see what happens—it's part of the sense of discovery. More and more I'm seeing how that is becoming very much part of me—my belief system. And how I die? I don't know, but I will—that's a guarantee.

The frankness with which Doris spoke to me about her own death may reflect her age, but it also reflects a moment of increasing awareness about death in the United States.

Both scholars and the larger public are engaged in discussions about death rituals and afterlife beliefs in the form of conferences, books, and articles. Existing scholarly research has centered on grieving and bereavement, while popular works are predominantly interested in the growing variety of death practices.[1] A theme that unites both lines of inquiry is the role of institutions within these processes. A sense of community has been shown to aid in the grieving process and many people turn to institutions to help both emotionally and logistically during times of loss.[2] Historically, these institutions have been religious, and

[1] A popular example is the work of Caitlin Doughty, a mortician by training who advocates for death acceptance and Western funeral industry reform. She has authored three best-selling books, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes & Other Lessons from the Crematory* in 2014, *From Here to Eternity; Traveling the World to Find the Good Death* in 2017, and *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs?: Big Questions from Tiny Mortals About Death* in 2019. *Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs* won the Goodreads Choice Awards 2019 for Science and Technology (voted on by Goodreads' readers) with 29,594 votes.

[2] Elizabeth Collinson, Sandra E. Gramling, and Benjamin D. Lord, "The Role of Religious Affiliation in Christian and Unaffiliated Bereaved Emerging Adults' Use of Religious Coping," *Death Studies* 40, no. 2

there have been clear theological responses to the challenges of grief and questions about afterlife.[3] Today, the blurry boundary between the secular and the religious is a sign that our language and concepts are breaking down. Polls show an increasing number of people are "spiritual but not religious" (or SBNR) or among the "religiously unaffiliated," which can include atheists, agnostics, generally spiritual people, or something else. When death occurs and ontological questions about life after death arise, where does this subset of people find solace? If these people do turn to institutions, what are the institutional characteristics or boundaries and how do they go about resolving challenges or questions within them?

Contemporary death studies in the United States have yet to engage death ritual and belief ethnographically, instead turning toward historical or sociological methods in considering these questions. An ethnographic approach provides more nuanced understandings of what the sociological data indexes and better contextualizes the historical narrative in the present moment. Gary Laderman has written a history of death practices in the United States, tracing burial practice throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[4] Laderman's work focuses on the development of the funeral industry and mainline Christian practices. Stephen Prothero's history of cremation practices in the United States provides insight into the ways in which death ritual in the United States is shifting. He includes

(2016): 102–12; Jessie Dezutter et al., "The Role of Religion in Death Attitudes: Distinguishing Between Religious Belief and Style of Processing Religious Contents," *Death Studies* 33, no. 1 (2008): 73–92; Jonathan Jong and Jamin Halberstadt, *Death Anxiety and Religious Belief: An Existential Psychology of Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); Melissa M. Kelley and Keith T. Chan, "Assessing the Role of Attachment to God, Meaning, and Religious Coping as Mediators in the Grief Experience," *Death Studies* 36, no. 3 (2012): 199–227.

[3] Philippe Aries, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1974).

[4] Gary Laderman, *Rest in Peace: A Cultural History of Death and the Funeral Home in Twentieth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

"secularization" as part of the narrative around the increase in the number of cremations.[5] Tony Walter's sociological work examines modern New Age and non-denominational practices primarily in the United Kingdom and Europe.[6] Douglas Davies also works on death rituals in the United Kingdom. He argues for the importance of rhetoric, or what people say around death.[7] There have been a few isolated forays into ethnographic research, including Kathleen Garces-Foley's study of funerals conducted at funeral homes in Ventura, California, which focused on funerals in which the family did not identify with any particular tradition. She found that there was a typical ritual progression to the funerals regardless of affiliation.

While Garces-Foley's work demonstrates how unaffiliated, SBNR, or "secular" people seek out nonreligious resources within funeral homes, there is relatively little on spiritual or liberal religious congregations that are filling a similar niche.[8] As described by Leigh E. Schmidt and Sally M. Promey, American religious liberalism emerged from countervailing forces within Protestant Christianity but then extended to include "the assemblies of liberals, eclectics, and seekers" that gained popularity in the nineteenth and into the twentieth century.[9] The volume seeks to go beyond the narrative of liberal

[5] Stephen Prothero, *Purified by Fire: A History of Cremation in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[6] Tony Walter, "Death in the New Age," *Religion* 23, no. 2 (n.d.).

[7] Douglas James Davies, *Mors Britannica: Lifestyle and Death-Style in Britain Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, n.d.); Douglas Davies, *Death, Ritual, and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funerary Rites*, Third Edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

[8] Kathleen Garces-Foley, "Funerals of the Unaffiliated," *OMEGA* 46, no. 4 (2003 2002): 287–302.

[9] Leigh E. Schmidt and Sally M. Promey, eds., *American Religious Liberalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 6.

Protestantism to turn to "the fluid, self-critical, and often wildly creative qualities of American religious liberalism," which includes groups such as Spiritualists, Unitarians, Quakers, Free Thinkers, and others.[10]

As Promey and Schmidt discuss in the introduction to the volume, Catherine Albanese's history of metaphysical traditions offers another possible way to characterize these groups. Although Unity and Spiritualism fit nicely into her metaphysical paradigm, many Unitarian Universalists resist classifying themselves within the metaphysical tradition. Although there are definitely points of overlap between Unitarianism and the metaphysical tradition, particularly, as Albanese indicates, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "religious liberalism" is a more expansive descriptor that better fits the denomination's self-understanding.[11] As religiously liberal congregations, all three groups offer people who have a wide range of views the opportunity to explore ontological questions in a community setting. Each is situated within a historical tradition and defines the range of views it can accommodate, while also promoting openness to alternative ideas. Each strikes a balance between individualism and commonality, but it remains unclear, in the historiography, what that looks like in relation to death rituals and beliefs.[12]

To look more closely at the rituals and beliefs around death, I have conducted ethnographic research at three such institutions in Santa Barbara, California—Unity of Santa Barbara (Unity), The Unitarian Society of Santa Barbara (the UU Society), and The

[10] Schmidt and Promey, 2.

[11] Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 154.

[12] Katrina C. Hoop, "Being A Community OF Individuals: Collective Identity And Rhetorical Strategies in a Unitarian Universalist Church," *International Review of Modern Sociology* 38, no. 1 (2012): 105–30.

Spiritualist Church of the Comforter (the Spiritualist Church).[13] During the five to eight weeks I attended each site, I examined the ways in which institutional structure, leadership, and members work in tandem to make meaning when faced with death. Despite their complicated and sometimes hostile relationship with Christianity, each site had Sunday services that began around 10:00 a.m. I attended at least eight services at each location and conducted a total of fifteen semi-structured interviews—six with leadership, nine with laypeople. Several people with whom I spoke had experienced a loss within three years, but that was not a requirement for interviewing.

In approaching this fieldwork, I asked whether what people believe about death is important in these congregations. And if it does indeed matter, to what extent? How do beliefs inform practices such as funerals and grief support groups—and vice-versa? These death-related questions are ones we often call religious or think of in religious terms. The three sites stand out because they offer the structure of a religious organization for those that might otherwise be considered SBNR.[14] While many spiritual or nonreligious people may turn to funeral homes for death rituals and support when a death occurs, I argue that Unity, the UU Society, and the Spiritualist Church are places where people can turn not only for emotional support but also to renew their sense of meaning and purpose in response to death and other significant losses.

[13] "Church" connotes Christian traditions, so I will use institution or group or congregation here to refer to these sites. The Unitarian Society specifically eschews the term "church," but both Unity and the Spiritualist Church accept "church" as a description of their institution.

[14] Unity's website states: "Unity is for people who might call themselves *spiritual but not religious*," emphasis is mine. The Unitarian Universalist Association describes how UUs are "weaving" traditions and identities like atheist, agnostic, Buddhist, Christian, Earth-Centered, Hindu, Humanist, Jewish, and Muslim into their beliefs today. The National Spiritualist Association of Churches states that their tradition is "Religion, Philosophy, and Science in one," and therefore open to anyone to explore.

Scholars have done little research on the contemporary death rituals and beliefs of the Unitarian Universalist, Spiritualist, or Unity Church traditions. Denominational histories include historical and "doctrinal" beliefs but have not focused on individual members. This is a noteworthy absence given the importance of individuality in these traditions, which would lead us to expect some diversity in beliefs and practices. This paper will examine how people who attend these different liberal institutions think about and enact beliefs around death. The differences in the way that groups or individuals approach death provide insights into their deepest concerns. Unity, the UU Society, and the Spiritualist Church each have flexible guidelines and leadership training that invite the integration of personal afterlife beliefs and death rituals within an institutionally agreed-upon framework. These are sites of institutional meaning-making for those that are religious, SBNR, or something else.[15] Through institutional meaning-making, beliefs about the afterlife and expectations surrounding death rituals are explored and retooled through interactions with other members, ritual attendance, and personal experiences of loss.

[15] For example, one of my interlocuters self-describes as an atheist.

Individualized Spirituality Within an Institutional Framework

The death rituals and afterlife beliefs found in Unity, Unitarian Universalism, and Spiritualism are influenced by several factors, including the historical precedents in these traditions and the training the ministers receive. The form these rituals take has been occluded by the tendency, previously within scholarship and today more in popular understanding, to contrast organized religion and individualized spirituality. Institutional religion has been criticized in this framework for being too rigid, rife with contradiction, and not fostering personal relationships with the divine.[16] Much of the literature on spirituality in the last several years has been oriented toward a growing individualization of spirituality and a move away from institutions.[17] Courtney Bender's work on metaphysicals in Cambridge, Massachusetts demonstrates, however, that the line between individual spirituality and institutions is much more blurry. She argues that though her informants are called individualistic and see themselves as autonomous and unique, they rely on institutions and communities and participate in a tradition. This leads her to conclude that in these communities the spiritual is institutionalized differently from institutional religion.[18]

Unlike Bender's metaphysicals, many of those with whom I spoke can recognize themselves in a historical lineage. They still consider themselves individuals, but they

[16] Wouter Hanegraaff, "New Age Religion," in *Religions in the Modern World*, ed. Linda Woodhead, Hiroko Kawanami, and Christopher Partridge, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009).

[17] Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Robert Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious Understanding Unchurched America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Paul Heelas et al., *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2005); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

[18] Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

associate traditions and beliefs with their respective communities. Because scholars' attention has been so focused on those who identify as "spiritual but not religious" and contemporary spirituality as characterized by lack of organization, scholars have not delved into places in which spiritual or secular ways of life are being fostered in formal institutional settings today.[19] And yet, in the histories of these traditions, scholars have recognized the institutional turn toward individuality and their endorsement of various social reforms as a support of pluralism.[20] The scholarship on contemporary Unity, Unitarian Universalist, and Spiritualist traditions have largely ignored the mutual interaction of (or dynamic tensions between) individual and group in favor of a focus on their more quirky characteristics of activism, social justice, and relaxed theology.

The emphasis on individuality and the role that each of these traditions has had on reform movements is also reflected in changing death rituals and afterlife beliefs. When cremation became a topic of debate in the mid-nineteenth century, it was Unitarians, Spiritualists, and Free Thinkers who advocated this practice. These groups were also in favor of funeral reform, which they debated into the middle of the twentieth century.[21] By

[19] There have been studies that have looked at small group settings that foster spirituality, such as Robert Wuthnow's *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York: Free Press, 1994) and works about small groups within Christian traditions, like James S. Bielo, *Words Upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). And Steven Sutcliffe observes spirituality as existing in "flexible and resilient cultural institutions" in Steven Sutcliffe, "The Dynamics of Alternative Spirituality: Seekers, Networks, and 'New Age,'" in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 479. There is also emerging research on organized nonbelievers and "secular" people, see Alfredo Garcia and Joseph Blankholm, "The Social Context of Organized Nonbelief: County-Level Predictors of Nonbeliever Organizations in the United States," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 55, no. 1 (2016): 70–90.

[20] Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, Second Edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

[21] Prothero, *Purified by Fire*.

decreasing the role of liturgical and ritual formality in the funeral setting, these traditions allowed space for greater individuality.[22]

In speaking with the leadership of Unity, the UU Society, and the Spiritualist Church, I observed that each person was aware of this balance between fostering individual belief and remaining true to institutional guidelines. They use the language of religion and spirituality almost interchangeably to refer to both their institutional role and the fostering of independent beliefs. In this section I will argue that the history of these traditions and the ministerial training offered reinforces individual belief within the constraints of a general framework or set of values.[23] This carries over into the leadership's open approach to afterlife and death ritual. I will develop the argument by tracing the traditions' historical lineages, discussing how the leaderships' training prepares them for coping with ontological questions, and how innovations are welcome in modern death rituals or "celebrations of life."

Historical Beliefs

Unity

Unity's origins lie in the nineteenth century with Missouri couple Myrtle and Charles Fillmore. The pair heard metaphysician Eugene B. Weeks, a follower of Christian Science, lecture on the healing power of God in 1886. Myrtle, in particular, came away from the talk believing that she could heal her physical ailments through the power of prayer and meditation. After two years of practice, Myrtle claimed to have successfully healed herself of

[22] My interlocuters point out that this difference is evident when comparing "low church" to "high church" settings and is also seen in some Christian services to distinguish them from "high church" Catholics or Episcopalians, for example.

[23] As also seen for "unaffiliated" funerals done in funeral home settings in Garces-Foley, "Funerals of the Unaffiliated."

tuberculosis and, upon dedicating himself to the practice following Myrtle's purported success, Charles was able to heal his leg that had been damaged since childhood. The Fillmores worked with several leaders of the New Thought Movement, including Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, and her student, Emma Curtis Hopkins who later diverged from Eddy's teachings. Not originally intending to start a church, the Fillmores began publishing the newsletter *Modern Thought* in 1889 to share their spiritual message. As a New Thought movement, Unity flourished.[24] In 1890, the Fillmores announced a prayer group that would come to be known as "Silent Unity." The group incorporated as the Unity School of Christianity in 1914. The Fillmores hosted classes on their farm in Missouri, which grew into a seminary when students requested greater organization, and which became the official headquarters of Unity in 1949.

Unity has typically been treated as an organized religion, despite drawing from disparate New Thought traditions.[25] While Christian Scientists, who were close cousins of Unity, combined Platonized Hermeticism and spiritualist-magnetic influences with Calvinism, Fillmore mixed similar materials with Christian liberalism and Theosophy.[26] Unity remained decentralized throughout much of the twentieth century to "preserve ideologies of seeking only the God within."[27] In 1914, the International New Thought Alliance was formed, but Unity School of Christianity was only briefly included until 1922

[24] Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 326.

[25] Ann Taves and Michael Kinsella, "Hiding in Plain Sight: The Organizational Forms of 'Unorganized Religion,'" in *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion*, ed. Steven J. Sutcliffe and Ingvild Saelid (New York: Routledge, 2014).

[26] Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 329.

[27] Albanese, 326.

because Charles Fillmore thought of Unity as "practical Christianity" and distinct from New Thought. Scholar of religion Michael Bach visited Unity headquarters several times in the mid-twentieth century and reported that leaders were not concerned with the number of members, but instead with how many people were engaging with their many written materials and radio broadcasts.[28] Despite this resistance to organization and leadership's preference to be called a "movement" rather than a church, Unity became the largest of the small New Thought denominations in the twentieth century.[29]

Even at Unity headquarters under the guidance of Charles and Myrtle Fillmore and their sons, questions of the afterlife and death ritual remained open. In a 1960s interview with Lowell Fillmore, one of the founders' sons and a Unity minister, he was quoted as saying: "Unity's emphasis is on life *here* rather than in the hereafter. We feel that if we can make this life the very best life we possibly can, the hereafter will take care of itself. Unity is partly a turn-away from religions that put the main emphasis on preparation for death. Unity says, 'Live! Live now! Live fully!'"[30] Bach also confirmed that many members at headquarters continued to live by the principle set by Charles Fillmore that God did not create man to die. The sense of "eternal life" comes from a belief in reincarnation in which you continue to be reborn until you learn how to live, which is distinct from Eastern understandings. Fillmore's reincarnation ideas were drawn from Helena Blavatsky and Henry S. Olcott's Orientalizing

[28] Marcus Bach, *The Unity Way of Life* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), 92.

[29] Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 399.

[30] Bach, *The Unity Way of Life*, 154.

project within Theosophy.[31] Toward the end of his life, Fillmore was said to have often commented that he would live forever, which was later interpreted through this lens.[32]

Despite these theological groundings emerging from Fillmore's own Theosophical beliefs and liberal Protestantism, Unity had a consistent commitment to openness. Bach described his previous work with people who had psychical experiences in other denominations that felt unable to speak with their ministers for fear of being branded as crazy or under the influence of the devil. In contrast, "although [Unity] does not endorse psychism and although every Unity leader is acquainted with Charles Fillmore's stand on the matter," namely, that while there was some valid psychic phenomena, it was better to set it aside and look to God, "Unity is ready to deal understandingly with those who have questions in this field."[33] There is an absence of fear about damnation or worry about the afterlife in Bach's description of Unity members' beliefs.

Bach presents less information about particular death rituals during his time at Unity headquarters, but he does note that cremation is the rule, which would have been unusual for the time.[34] In the 1960s, when Bach was interviewing members and attending courses at Unity headquarters, there were still few cremations in the United States, but the number was beginning to rise.[35] In 1963, Pope Paul VI relaxed the Catholic Church's cremation ban and, months later, Jessica Mitford released *The American Way of Death*, a scathing critique of the

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[31] Albanese has also traced a history of "western" notions of reincarnation. See *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 282.

[32] Bach, *The Unity Way of Life*, 158.

[33] Bach, 162.

[34] Bach, 164.

[35] Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 163.

American funeral industry. These two factors accompanied a noticeable increase in the number of cremations. That said, the national cremation rate remained under five percent until a significant spike in 1972.[36] In 2016, the National Funeral Directors Association reported that 50.2% of Americans chose cremation.[37] Unity likely inherited its cremation practice from religious outsiders—like Unitarians, Spiritualists, and other Free Thinkers—in the nineteenth century.

Unitarian Universalism

Unitarian Universalism as an institution is the newest tradition of the three on which I have focused, but the two independent lines of the movement—Unitarianism and Universalism—are older. In tracing the history of Unitarian Universalism, historian Dan McKanan reaches as far back to Origen in 255 and to theological debates about the nature of the trinity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The institutional beginnings of Unitarian Universalism, however, lie in the United States.

Unitarianism emerged from Congregationalism, many members of which came to the colonies to escape religious conflict in England. Retaining its congregational polity, Unitarians received their name from their belief that the Christian God is one person as opposed to a trinity. They would also affirm that there was no doctrine of predestination and that no one had to suffer the torments of hell. The doctrine of Unitarians was formalized at Boston's King Chapel with the adoption of a new prayer book in 1786. James Freeman, an

[36] Prothero, 164, fig. 2.

[37] Jessica Koth, "NFDA Cremation and Burial Report Shows Rate of Cremation at All-Time High," National Funeral Directors Association, July 18, 2017, https://www.nfda.org/news/media-center/nfda-news-releases/id/2511/nfda-cremation-and-burial-report-shows-rate-of-cremation-at-all-time-high.

unordained Congregationalist, revised the prayer book by removing the Gloria Patri, prayers to Christ, and all but two Trinitarian references as well as changing the words priest to minister and sacrament to ordinance.[38] In 1825, Unitarians officially separated from Congregationalists in the United States with the establishment of the American Unitarian Association.[39] Before the denomination was founded, leaders had already begun to lay down its principles of "free and independent religious inquiry."[40]

Meanwhile, Universalists founded their first independent congregation in Gloucester, Massachusetts in 1779, grounded in their belief in universal salvation for all.[41] Universalist Hosea Ballou led the way in the development of the Universalist theology. In Ballou's *A Treatise on Atonement* (1805), he explains that "if sin be not infinite, the dissatisfaction occasioned by sin is not infinite; therefore, an infinite sacrifice is not required."[42] Following this, many subsequent Universalist ministers echoed the belief that every individual of the human race shall become "holy and happy," disavowing the Christian construct of hell and damnation.[43]

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[38] Dan McKanan, ed., *A Documentary History of Unitarian Universalism: Volume One, From the Beginning to 1899* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2017), 103.

[39] McKanan, xiii.

[40] David Reed, "To the Public," Christian Register, April 20, 1821 in McKanan, *Documentary History, Vol. 1*, 191; Daniel Walker Howe, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

[41] McKanan, *Documentary History, Vol. 1*, xiii.

[42] Hosea Ballou, *A Treatise on Atonement* (Randolph, VT, 1805) in McKanan, *Documentary History, Vol. 1*, 137.

[43] Thomas Wittemore, *The Plain Guide to Universalism* (Boston, 1840) in McKanan, *Documentary History, Vol. 1*, 299.

Founding a congregation in Gloucester that dissented from the established Congregational Church sparked controversy over the payment of taxes to support the established church. Epes Sargent, a Universalist, argued against the requirement, but acknowledged that "though we are united in a form of worship...we have carefully avoided the establishment of it, because we are fully convinced that our blessed Redeemer left no particular form to his followers."[44] The Universalists sought community, and felt that as a dissenting church, they should still be exempt from taxes. This legal controversy, alongside many other factors, culminated in Massachusetts' disestablishment in 1833.[45]

Before the twentieth century, both Unitarians and Universalists considered themselves Protestant Christians. In the final decade of the nineteenth century, both affirmed non-creedal identities: the Unitarians at the Saratoga Conference of 1895 and the Universalists in Boston in 1899.[46] The non-creedal aspects blended with both the rise of the social gospel in the late nineteenth century and then the rise of religious humanism in the early twentieth. As the number of post-Christians and non-Christians in the groups swelled in the early twentieth century, it solidified their collective identity as a liberal religion, largely influenced by humanism, rather than a form of liberal Protestantism.[47]

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[44] "An Appeal to the Impartial Public by the Society of Christian Independents, congregating in Gloucester (1785)" Pamphlet, Epes Sargent in McKanan, *A Documentary History of Unitarian Universalism: Volume One*, 1: From the Beginning to 1899, 107.

[45] McKanan, *Documentary History, Vol. 1*, 106.

[46] McKanan, xviii.

[47] John H. Dietrich, "Unitarianism and Humanism," in Curtis Reese, ed. *Humanist Sermons* (Chicago: Open Court, 1927) 100-102, 111-13 in Dan McKanan, ed., *A Documentary History of Unitarian Universalism: Volume Two from 1900 to the Present* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2017), 81–83.

In 1961, Unitarians and Universalists merged to form the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) due to their affinity of beliefs and with the aim of decreasing competition among smaller liberal religions.[48] This is the organization that the Unitarian Society of Santa Barbara belongs to today. The joint UUA consolidated the general principles held by each. The 1959 Constitution of the UUA adopted six principles of a free faith, in which each member unites in seeking truth and affirms each other's worth.[49] As Unitarian Universalism has moved into the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, it has continued to expand its message of inclusion. James Ishmael Ford, the first person ordained as both a UU and a Buddhist in 1991, explains:

> Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religious movement that has one foot within Christianity and the other outside. And, this is very important, sometime during this century the weight shifted to the outer foot...Today, as a radically non-creedal body, individual Unitarian Universalists hold many different theological opinions. One may be a Christian, a Jew, an atheist, even a neo-pagan, while still being considered a "good" UU.[50]

The flexibility at the leadership level continues to allow for a diverse set of beliefs within the congregation and a positive attitude toward innovation. This is also true with respect to afterlife beliefs and death rituals.

The Reverend O.B. Frothingham, who initially endorsed Unitarianism and Christian Transcendentalism and eventually moved beyond them to found the Free Religious

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[48] Joint Commission on Merger of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America. Joint Merger Commission, *An Informational Manual for the Use of Unitarian and Universalist Churches, Societies, and Fellowships in Considering the Question of Merger or Alternatives to Merger* (Wellesley Hills, MA: The Commission, 1958) in McKanan, *Documentary History, Vol. 2*, 177-179

[49] Joint Merger Commission, *The Plan to Consolidate The American Unitarian Association and The Universalist Church of America* (Wellesley Hills, MA: The Commission, 1959) in McKanan, *Documentary History, Vol. 2,* 195–201.

[50] James Ishmael Ford, "An Invitation to Western Buddhists," uubf.org/wp/invitation) in McKanan, *A Documentary History of Unitarian Universalism: Volume Two from 1900 to the Present,* 429.

Association, gave one of the first cremation sermons in the United States in the 1860s.[51] Ministers who supported cremation were disproportionately represented in the liberal denominations like Unitarianism and Episcopalianism, as well as liberal groups like the Free Religious Association and the Society for Ethical Culture. As early as the late nineteenth century, Unitarian minister Jenkin Lloyd Jones called for funeral reform and "urged parishioners to exorcise vulgarity from the funeral."[52] The individualization of the funeral was another step toward striking a balance between doctrine and membership.

Spiritualism

Modern Spiritualism emerged from several different social and religious factors in the 1840s and 1850s, but the Fox sisters' rappings in Hydesville, New York in 1848 are the most often-cited beginning of the movement in the United States. Spiritualism developed as a movement separate from any sect, influenced by science and natural law and often embraced by people who strayed from the status quo and were open to new philosophies.[53] In contrast to Unity and UUs, they did not have a congregational structure but rather circles, lecturers, and periodicals. Some Spiritualist groups adopted the form of "organized religion," but it was a small subset of Spiritualists and not representative of the movement.[54] Nevertheless, as historian Bret E. Carroll points out, despite categorizations of individualism, antiauthoritarianism, and anti-structuralism, "they developed well-structured religious

[51] Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 18.

[52] Prothero, 91.

[53] Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, Religion in North America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

[54] Taves and Kinsella, "Hiding in Plain Sight."

practices and used structural metaphors in justifying their moments of antistructural behavior." Carroll argues that Spiritualists explained themselves in terms of the spiritual republican ideals that emerged from the American Revolution—avoiding organized religion in favor of individual moral fortitude.[55]

Prominent Spiritualists drew from Emmanuel Swedenborg, specifically regarding communication with spirits and the design of the afterlife, as well as from mesmerism, animal magnetism, and science.[56] Spiritualists were frequently critiqued as being too materialist, which here refers to Spiritualists' need to physically manifest spirit and to the importance of verification.[57] The ability to physically manifest spirits has key implications for how they thought about the afterlife. The practices that manifested from these core beliefs took place in the form of public demonstrations, small groups, and therapeutic dyads.[58]

The lectures and small groups typically met in non-church or domestic spaces, but their views regarding churches in general were mixed. Spiritualism allowed for a flexibility in belief and—alongside other liberal traditions like Unitarians, Universalists, and Quakers—participation in multiple religious forums. In the antebellum period Spiritualists remained mostly un-institutionalized despite some who began to organize into churches in the late 1850s. However, these groups are not representative of the movement as a whole. The organization ultimately created a separation between the minister, who delivered lectures or

[55] Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 7.

[56] Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 181.

[57] Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*.

[58] Taves and Kinsella, "Hiding in Plain Sight."

sermons, and mediums, who gave greetings from Spirit.[59] In 1893 the National Spiritual Association of Churches (NSAC) was founded in the United States and officially moved a subset of the Spiritualist movement into the realm of "organized" religion when it incorporated as a nonprofit religious organization. In addition to offering structure, this move was also made to protect the religious freedom of mediums.[60] The Spiritualist Church of the Comforter in Santa Barbara is part of the NSAC today.

Even within this official organization, most Spiritualists continued to value, like their antebellum predecessors, individualism and development over rigidity of doctrine and conformity to modes of worship.[61] One of their spiritual headquarters—Lily Dale in New York—was founded in 1879 with these values in mind.[62] In his study of the history and modern incarnation of Lily Dale, Darryl Caterine points out that Spiritualism has continued to develop, taking on characteristics of the New Age in the 1980s. Caterine describes the integration of the New Age beliefs into Spiritualism as the exception rather than the rule, since much of the New Age is oriented toward individualism rather than groups.[63] However, as we have seen in both the Unity tradition and Unitarian Universalism, the shift in focus from the group to the individual is not uncommon even within institutions.

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[59] Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 157.

[60] Darryl V. Caterine, "Between Two Worlds: Transformations of Spiritualism in Contemporary Lily Dale," in *Handbook of Spiritualism and Channeling*, ed. Cathy Gutierrez, vol. 9, Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 295.

[61] Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*, 40.

[62] Caterine, "Between Two Worlds," 294.

[63] Caterine, 310–11.

There has been little documentation or analysis of Spiritualist death traditions, despite Spiritualists' practice of communication with the Spirit world. Like Unitarians and the predecessors of the Unity tradition, Spiritualists in the nineteenth century favored cremation, based on the views of spirits who spoke through mediums at seances.[64] Following the increase in cremations in the 1980s, many Americans embraced cremation at the end of the twentieth century, drawing on language like purification of the spirit and releasing spirit from the body that was similar to Spiritualist language the century before.[65]

Unity, the UU Society, and the Spiritualist Church have each inherited the history of individualism within a religious structure. In contrast to the congregationalism of NSAC and Unity, which emerged from the Spiritualist and New Thought movements, Unitarian Universalism has always had a congregational form. All, however, have been identified with social reform and proponents of afterlife and death ritual reimagining. This history informs ministerial training and creates a flexible system of afterlife belief and death ritual from which leaders in these institutions can draw.

Denomination-Sanctioned Afterlife Beliefs

The historical background shows how afterlife and death beliefs have developed in these groups alongside more general changes in society. However, history alone does not dictate the way in which this information is transmitted. As spiritual leaders of their congregations, ministers must choose how to address questions of death and afterlife. In these liberal religions, the ministers are expected to approach the subject of the afterlife with

[64] Prothero, *Purified by Fire*, 87–88.

[65] Prothero, 206.

an open mind. While each holds personal beliefs, not all of them shared those perspectives with me. At Unity and the UU Society, the ministerial approach is to remain neutral about the afterlife, even when pressed, and instead to reflect the question back to the person who is asking. At the Spiritualist Church, the only "rule" that exists is to affirm that life continues after the change called death, so the minister there is more willing to share that perspective with fellow members.

At Unity, both Reverend Martin and Reverend Deborah highlight "love" as a central theme of the afterlife. Reverend Martin was careful to clarify that, with respect to what happens in the afterlife, "we don't profess to know, but our understanding of life is that life does not end." Reverend Deborah had a near-death experience that colors her understanding. When she experienced her near-death, or what she calls her "more life experience, because that's what it's led to," she felt pure joy, love, and freedom. If someone were to ask them about the afterlife, both would "hold the space" for that person to figure out what they believed. For Reverend Martin, it is not necessary to convince the asker of anything. Reverend Deborah has a similar sentiment and affirms that even if someone believed the worst—that a loved one was in hell or suffering—she would try to ask questions to investigate that. She was critical of other Unity ministers who may turn to Charles Fillmore or other noted thinkers within the tradition instead of thinking through their own personal experiences to talk about afterlife. While their training in seminary did not direct them to use sources like Fillmore particularly, Reverend Deborah believes that many leaders in Unity rely on them for answers to big questions.

To become an ordained minister for Unity, Reverend Martin applied to the seminary, located in Kansas City. The program accepted about half of all applications following an

interview on site. During the two years of coursework, he took classes on Unity history, theology, and the art of crafting sermons. To prepare for the public speaking aspect of ministry, Reverend Martin went to Toastmasters International meet-ups—places in which people can practice their public speaking in small groups and receive constructive feedback. Reverend Deborah took a slightly different track, starting her education in a Spiritual Enrichment and Development Program that was hosted at Unity Village in Missouri. She took 250 credits in this track and became a licensed Unity teacher. She became ordained in the next year, taking the same types of classes offered to Reverend Martin. They both note that the training was focused more on history and creating sermons than providing specific kinds of content, instead offering many different sources and "truths" to draw from.

The UU Society lead minister, student minister, and a UU Society community minister working in hospice also emphasize holding the space with askers over following doctrine. Scholar Lori Leitgeb discusses how a familiar mantra in Unitarian Universalism is "deeds, not creeds," which they interpret in a this-worldly sense. Mark, the student minister, is currently in his second year of a three-year Master of Divinity program at Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago, Illinois. He is completing his one-year internship required to reach "full fellowship" in the eyes of the Unitarian Universalist ministerial fellowship committee. Mark explains that "because of our church polity only individual churches can ordain people, but [full fellowship] is the UU way of saying that we think this person is competent and viable as a minister." Mark was also required to take a Clinical Pastor Education (CPE) internship, which he completed at a hospital in Peoria, Illinois by serving on the chaplaincy team. It was in this role that he was given instruction on how to care for a person who is dying and the grieving family. Mark describes learning how to help

the family in front of him and thought his Unitarian Universalist beliefs about openness served him in this pursuit. He had some reservations because of his own background—he explained:

> I think for me, personally, it was still the hardest for me to pray to the Christian God when asked because there's kind of an integrity piece that I struggle with. But, it's not about me. It's about the person that I'm serving—the pastoral care seeker. So, at the end of the day, what they ask for, what they need you say or what you glean in some way.

For Reverend Hannah and Reverend Miriam, who both received ordination after earning a master's degree, they believe their role is to uncover what the person approaching them believes instead of imposing beliefs on them. Both completed an internship at a congregation before being ordained and Reverend Miriam, who currently works in hospice as a chaplain, also completed a CPE internship at a hospital that inspired her to go into chaplaincy work. Their training directs them to listen to the beliefs of the person in front of them. In helping UU members or people in hospice determine their personal beliefs, they try to "connect people to their goodness" [Miriam] and "try to help them make positive meaning out of it" [Hannah]. As mentioned in the section above, Unitarian Universalists have long rejected the idea of hell. In their ministerial work, Reverends Hannah and Miriam aim to point congregants in a generally positive direction and use questions to foster peace and solace. They encourage people to work out their own answers to ontological questions within a Unitarian Universalist framework, but do not prescribe answers to those questions.[66]

Like Unitarian Universalists, Spiritualists—historically and doctrinally—do not subscribe to a belief in hell. Reverend Rachel asserts that "there is no hell. The difference between the Christian religion and our religion—there were a lot of Christian Spiritualists

[66] Lori E. Leitgeb, "Building Theology, Reinscribing Subjectivity: Cultivating a Liberal Identity in Unitarian Universalism" (Dissertation, 2009), 132–33.

too—is that Jesus is a wayshower." Reverend Rachel and the laypeople who are training for their pastoral skills certification believe that consciousness goes on after your body dies. However, they would only press this point to a member because that is one of the tenets of membership. If approached at services or during weekday medium readings by non-members who have questions about the afterlife, Reverend Rachel points out that "like chaplains, they have to be really diverse" and you have to "honor what that person believes." More than Unity or the UU Society, at the Spiritualist Church there is a clear stance on the reality of an afterlife, even if the content of the afterlife differs in particularity. While the sentiment to honor what everyone believes is present, membership comes with an affirmation of the continuation of life that the spiritual leaders also assert from the pulpit.

From my interviews, it seems that personal belief is only a very small part of what it means to lead a liberal religious congregation in an exploration of death and afterlife. Because there can be some diversity in belief among attendees, the leadership must work to affirm disparate approaches. Bracketing their beliefs and affirming others are learned and practiced sensibilities. This style of affirmation is reinforced in the training that each minister undergoes at seminary and the openness with which they conduct death rituals.

Denomination-Sanctioned Death Ritual

If we consider the openness of clergy around the question of death to be part of their beliefs, it would follow that the death rituals over which they preside would reflect this. Garces-Foley's study of unaffiliated funerals demonstrates that the typically-Christian presiding clergy have a standard script or service that they follow, while the family contributes music and readings that are personal to them and the deceased. The liberal

religious groups that I investigated also follow a general guideline so that those attending can recognize the service as a death ritual, but there has been a shift from a relatively impersonal script that is concerned with the hereafter to an open and flexible script that celebrates the person's life. Family and friends can and do participate in the planning of these more personal and person-specific celebrations that focus on celebrating the life of the individual rather than their transition to an afterlife. Perhaps due to the shift to family-centered services, leadership reports that they received very little official training on how to perform funerals, and instead were given general suggestions.

Unity's Reverend Deborah explicitly says that in her training about death ritual there was no "this is the way you do it" perspective. During their seminary training, both she and Reverend Martin were given a standard service book that outlines weddings, memorials, and other life-transition ceremonies. In contrast to a liturgically-oriented Catholic or Jewish service, the service book does not provide a set structure, but "it's like a starting point." Reverend Martin was particularly thankful for that kind of guidance when he had to perform his first memorial service in which a woman approached him and "she said, my son—my 16-year old son—was gunned down—in a gang killing and I want you to do the funeral service for him." He had a plan for the service and notes written up for his homily but explains that he had to also speak to the emotions that were in the room—anger and resentment—in a way that a book could not outline.

Similarly, Reverend Deborah recognizes the importance of reading the situation, especially in presiding over sudden or unexpected death. In those situations, she emphasizes the importance of celebrating the life of the person. When, in my interview questions, I asked about funerals, Reverend Martin was quick to correct me and say, "Unity's approach is more

a celebration of life—memorial service is also used." Celebration of life is an important verbal marker for both leadership and laypeople who focus on the life of the person rather than on the afterlife or salvation.

The UU Society leadership also affirm that the standard Unitarian Universalist approach is a celebration of life and that ministers are given more of an outline of how services should be performed. Reverend Hannah explains that, in one of her classes in seminary, students were expected to develop a packet of resources for various kinds of life transitions that they collected from colleagues and mentors as well as from published books and articles. She went on to say that a culture is formed and "there's a thread that gets created, even if it's not institutionally like a Mass might be where there is a structure of what you are supposed to do. The result is that there is now a Unitarian Universalist memorial service style that you'll probably find pretty consistent across the tradition." In this description, she first defines what the service is not—an institutional Mass—but then ultimately embraces their consistent service style. Similarly, Reverend Miriam samples from several books so that she can look at the format, but the service is also largely based on the relationship she has had with the hospice patient and the family.

Reverend Rachel at the Spiritualist Church has less experience performing memorial services but only uses a small part of the training she received. Her training, a curriculum that several people within the church are currently taking, was done both online and in person at various workshops. The training courses are offered by the National Spiritualist Association of Churches through the auxiliary Morris Pratt Institute. Credentialing is available through coursework in mediumship, healing, and ministerial studies if you would like to become ordained. Much of this coursework is completed online, but the ministerial training requires

pastoral skills workshops attended in person. In her ministerial training, Reverend Rachel was required to do mock services and write up a practice memorial service. She performed the service and received feedback from the course instructor and her fellow ministers-in-training. Felicia and Nathan, two current Spiritualist Church members who are doing ministerial coursework, experienced similar training exercises, but neither was assigned a memorial service as a life-cycle event to practice.

Even at the denominational level for Unity, the UU Society, and the Spiritualist Church, there is a certain sense of flexibility in death rituals. Each generally calls end of life services "celebrations of life" or sometimes "memorial services," and the focus is on the life lived rather than the hereafter. This is even true in the services for the Spiritualist Church, where communication with the dead is part of their sacred practice. These types of communications do not occur at memorial services or celebrations of life, not least because you cannot choose which spirit to communicate with, but also because there is an assurance that there is continuation of life without needing the spirit communication to verify. Within these flexible structures, there are certain aspects that remain consistent and others than can change based on the families' or the deceased person's wishes.

Framework for Death Rituals

When the leadership members considered life rituals in general—baptisms or dedications of children, weddings, and funerals or memorials—they recognize that there are identifiable traits and traditions that accompany them. In cases like funerals, where the family is often shocked by grief, regardless of whether the death was expected, it is difficult for them to think through how they want to celebrate the person's life. Therefore, today it is

more common for people to have memorial services or celebrations of life that take place some period of time after the death. With the move toward cremation, there is no immediate rush to have a viewing of an embalmed body followed by a graveside service. Although this still occurs, in Unity, the UU Society, and the Spiritualist Church, the norm has shifted away from having the body or the cremated remains (cremains) present at the memorial, and toward holding the memorial later—sometimes weeks or months after death. Matthew Engelke explains that in British Humanist Association funerals, the coffin's presence causes conflict for people trying to remain grounded in a materialist frame. There is something about the presence of a dead body that shifts attention away from the celebration of that person's life.[67]

Garces-Foley's investigation into unaffiliated death rituals uncovers a common progression of service that she identifies. The standard model that she observed included opening words, prayer, reading, eulogy, sermon, music, and closing prayer while "they differed in choice of readings and music, the form and content of the eulogizing, and the prominence of the clergy's role."[68] For Garces-Foley's services, clergy was almost always Protestant, due to availability, and guided the service in some way. In some cases, there was a "shared eulogy" in which both the clergy and family or friends spoke, but often the clergy would do the eulogy with "toned down" religious references. The leaders of the three groups I studied echoed this, but they placed greater emphasis on the celebration of the individual and the collaborative nature of the event. Reverend Miriam, Unitarian Universalist chaplain, explains the same concept:

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[67] Matthew Engelke, "The Coffin Question: Death and Materiality in Humanist Funerals," *Material Religion* 11, no. 1 (2015): 26–48, https://doi.org/10.2752/205393215X14259900061553.

[68] Garces-Foley, "Funerals of the Unaffiliated," 298.

> Yeah, and those are like a wedding in the sense of there are sort of building blocks for a wedding, there are building blocks for a memorial. There is an opening and a closing and a reading and music and a eulogy and either friends and family coming and talking about the person who has departed or an open mic. And so, I sort of work with the family to find which of those building blocks are going to be appropriate for them.

The need to have that framework is even more important in the face of grief, but Reverend Miriam also observes that "the ritual and structure and the form itself is part of what helps people get through that process." It also speaks to the level of collaboration between the family and the leadership to make a service that is most appropriate.

Reverend Deborah, of Unity, describes how the last memorial service that she presided over was unique. She describes a man she had personally been friends with who had passed away, and she notes that he liked Santana, so that was the music that the family chose for the service. She also says they included "a slideshow of his friends and families and the things he loved to do." Beyond those personal touches, she also gave a short eulogy and his family and friends came up to speak. Reverend Martin adds that they will often have an opening poem or reading, and he will give a few short remarks.[69] In this instance another relative did the eulogy while the deceased's wife and son sat in the front row. In many services they include an open mic for people to share memories and anecdotes from the audience of friends and other family. Further, he explains that "my part was rather small—it usually is that way in the Unity service. There isn't this need to keep telling people about how these persons [the person who has died] are okay." The focus is rather on the celebration of a life well-lived.

[69] A very popular poem reading in these liberal religious circles is "Do Not Stand by My Grave and Weep" by Mary Elizabeth Fry. It was mentioned to me in interviews and in general conversation five times that I have documented, and at each field site.

However, the personal may also extend to addressing the contemporary moment. With the memorial service that Reverend Martin conducted for the young man who was a victim of gang-related homicide, he also recognized that he was speaking to two hundred angry teenagers. He explains, “I know I was speaking to people who were ready to do harm, you know what I’m saying? Retribution. So, I had to give a lesson about restraint and to honor this person not by what he died by, which was truly awful.” Again, the lesson is to live better in this life, not to be comforted by God’s justice, or to rest assured that the person is in a better place.

The UU Society’s Reverend Hannah describes a similar type of building-block structure to that which Reverend Miriam explains, and which resonates with Unity’s approach. Reverend Hannah estimates that “seventy-five percent of the time I end up doing that big-picture piece [of the person’s life]. And then there’s between four to six other people who will offer reflections.” Part of her role is to work with the family to fill those slots for reflections. Another innovation in the service is the personalization of her own remarks. Toward the end of the service she offers a prayer or blessing of gratitude for that person’s life that she changes to be reflective of that person. While death equalizes, it is the individualization of the service that allows us to remember the individual as they lived. She also offers a piece of advice: **“**after people offer their reflections you kind of have to close things up a little. So, everybody is emotional—you don’t want to make people sing after that [laughs]. If you’re going to sing “Amazing Grace” do it in the first half of the service, not the second half of the service.”

In Reverend Rachel’s description of the way she conducted memorial services at the Spiritualist Church, she describes an ongoing collaboration with the family members. She

provides the venue and the opening remarks, but in one instance she looked to the deceased's wife for music and to another speaker to perform the eulogy. For a very large service held for their previous pastor, the venue had to be changed to a nearby church to accommodate the number of people who wanted to attend. Reverend Rachel describes the event as "quite informal" with many speakers coming forward to honor the late pastor.

Reverend Rachel conducted another service for a University of California, Santa Barbara math professor who had attended the Spiritualist Church for years. Many of his colleagues did not know he had this "spiritual side," as Reverend Pam explains, and were interested in learning more about Spiritualism's beliefs. She describes it as an exciting opportunity to share their scientific evidence of Spiritualism with the empirically minded professors. In his service, his wife directed the music she wanted to have—she included some of the songs from the Spiritualist Church hymnal—and the speaker she wanted to have—one of her husband's dear friends. Reverend Pam says that they do not usually have "greetings from Spirit"—do mediumship and have spirit communications—at the memorial services. She has never attended a service or heard of a spirit communication with someone at the funeral, but acknowledges that "maybe if somebody asked, 'do you have any messages.' It's kind of considered a separate part of the service and, as Spiritualists, we know that we cannot go, let's get touch in with this spirit. Come here, I want so and so." The idea that a medium can intentionally reach the person who the service is for violates the assertion that both people on Earth and in the Spirit world have free will.

This section has provided several examples of how, with minimal training and guidance about the specifics of memorial services, the leadership at Unity, the UU Society, and the Spiritualist Church have developed similar death ritual frameworks with similar

spaces for innovation. While the elements that people typically associate with end-of-life events—eulogy, music, speakers—still exist, the space for innovation is open in the way in which the eulogy is delivered, who delivers it, the types of music, and the method of memorialization, whether through slideshows, pictures, or stories. There is a spectrum in the role of the leadership at services: from offering a lot of support and structure as well as performing the eulogy to saying a few opening words and allowing family and friends to create their own kind of service.

The innovation that is part of these institutions' histories provides a natural foundation for their ongoing flexibility in their service style today. In Unity, Unitarian Universalism, and Spiritualism there is a history of defying traditional expectations and valuing individual thought and beliefs. These values are echoed in ministerial training, but they are also demanded by the individuals that are preparing their own services for the future or family members. However, the structure and the content of the service is important. The leadership offers that flexibility within a larger structure that offers a starting place and direction as well as a place to explore the ontological questions associated with death. As Unity, the UU Society, and the Spiritualist Church offer these spaces for innovation, they allow individuals to develop their own kinds of afterlife beliefs and death rituals within the larger framework.

Blending Practices in Afterlife Beliefs and Death Rituals

The previous section discusses the ways in which the leadership of Unity, the UU Society, and the Spiritualist Church understand their institutions' perspective on death and afterlife beliefs and how they represent death from the pulpit and as they conduct memorial services. This section will look more closely at personally held beliefs of laypeople and how they are shaped. Beliefs surrounding death and afterlife are rarely created in a vacuum. People are influenced by family, personal experiences, community, media, and peers. Beliefs can progress from interactions with other people and groups, but they can also be a reaction against these things. Beliefs then go on to inform the preferences for death ritual and are part of how it has changed.

In the United States during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, church congregations helped situate the broadly accepted cultural beliefs about death. Kathryn Gin Lum examines how people during this time began to reject the concept of hell, despite its ongoing presence in church rhetoric as a means of societal control. We have already seen such rejections in the history of the Unitarian Universalist tradition, ourselves.[70] Moreover, a 2014 poll conducted by Pew Research Center showed that fewer Americans believe in hell than believe in heaven, and this remained consistent across Christians, members of other religions, and unaffiliated categories.[71] Notable from the study was that "fewer than four-in-ten (37%) "nones" say they believe in heaven, while 27% believe in hell," which is lower

[70] Kathryn Gin Lum, *Damned Nation: Hell in America from Revolution to Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[71] Caryle Murphy, "Most Americans Believe in Heaven...and Hell," Survey (Pew Research Center, November 10, 2015), https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/10/most-americans-believe-in-heaven-and-hell/.

than the general populations (on both fronts) and much more closely aligned with liberal religious groups. While surveys are becoming more sophisticated in trying to pin down exactly what people mean when they indicate that they believe in heaven and hell, there is room for more ethnographic inquiry to examine these terms.

There has been a shift in how people think about the idea of heaven. No longer tied particularly to the Christian description of a heavenly palace in the sky, the people with whom I have spoken have much more general ideas of a positive or neutral afterlife.[72] Nearly everyone that I interviewed hedges even this belief in saying that, although they believe in an afterlife, they have no way of knowing what it entailed until they got there. The unknowability of the afterlife is a consistent presumption across liberal religious traditions. Although the congregations are largely dominated by afterlife-affirmers, this opens space for people who argue against belief in the afterlife because many will concede that it is impossible to know.

I have explained how the general principles of Unity, the UU Society, and the Spiritualist Church have outlined the institutional position on death and afterlife as open to individual interpretation. Here I demonstrate how laypeople combine beliefs from different areas of their lives to develop their own understanding. Catherine Albanese describes "combinativeness" in metaphysical traditions, but we see this exhibited widely in many American liberal traditions.[73] Rather than framing the history of metaphysical traditions in

[72] The history of heaven has been examined by Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang in *Heaven: A History* (1988) and by Jeffrey Burton Russel in *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence* (1997), in which he speaks to heaven as a "metaphoric ontology." They both argue that the concept of heaven, even within Christianity, exists in multiplicity.

[73] Schmidt and Promey, *American Religious Liberalism*, 2.

the United States in terms of consensus, conflict, or tolerance, Albanese points to "the religious worlds that people made together and often, without consciously taking note of it, with each other's cultural property."[74] This approach bears out in the way that my subjects talk about afterlife and death rituals for themselves and others. I argue that my interlocuters develop afterlife beliefs and death rituals by bringing together general institutional guidelines, ongoing conversations with others in and outside the group, and experiences of death rituals in both their tradition and other contexts.

Afterlife Beliefs, Generally Speaking

In line with much of the United States, my interviewees tend to believe in an afterlife that is neutral to positive, with some variation as to whether they would see family and friends after death.[75] Many considered this life a small blip on a larger screen. Melissa, a new member of Unity, grew up generally non-religious and explains that "I guess it is an afterlife, but I guess I see it also as a pre-life and a continuation of life. I see it as spirit—as energy." Based on Reverend Martin's responses, this is a common way to describe the afterlife within Unity. Continuation of spirit was a common theme, although it manifested in slightly different guises. For Damon, who also attends Unity, "I believe in the soul, so I guess that's why I believe in the afterlife. Like the whole idea about the divine nature within all of us, I just feel like it's not so organic." By organic, he is referring to the earthly body. Damon explains that the soul was something set apart from our physical body.

[74] Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 18.

[75] Caryle Murphy, "Most Americans Believe in Heaven…and Hell."

The continuity of life is the basic tenet of the Spiritualist Church. Members that I spoke with have different ways to describe spirit and soul, but nearly all discuss continuation of consciousness. Felicia expresses this more directly in explaining, "different people call it different things, our Spirit, our Soul, our Etheric body." She also describes a regression experience in which she went through the afterlife and back into previous lives. While this is an accepted belief at the Spiritualist Church, most of the my interlocuters do not have such an explicit conception of the afterlife. They affirm that they wouldn't really know until they got there, and that was okay. This was particularly interesting in the context of the Spiritualist Church, which affirms the practice of mediumship and would presumably have a pretty clear idea of what the afterlife entails. Lillian, the youngest members of the Spiritualist Church at twenty-two years old, admits "a lot of things I think about the afterlife I've just accepted I don't know and I won't know until I get there, but I would say that the good part of what I believe is I try not to focus on that too much, which sounds funny because that is what the entire religion is based on." It seems ironic that some of the Spiritualists, who are most assured about the existence of the afterlife, are not as engaged in defining what it is. The apparent disinterest in thinking about death itself may point to one of the reasons that death ritual is not highlighted as often in the historiography of Spiritualism.

Despite this general sense of unknowability, for all of those that I interviewed, there was a conviction that our souls do not go to hell, and only a couple of people expressed hope for "heaven." Carl, of Unity, thinks that "heaven might be simply joyous, peaceful state or an awareness that you're being returned to that awareness, but not as a sense of loss." The UU Society member Doris envisions an ethereal community that requires no "litmus test" for entry. She and her late husband Dennis often discussed the afterlife, and while Dennis did not

believe in heaven or an "old man in the sky that's going to say I did something wrong or something right," Dennis also did not want hell. Doris says that he never really resolved that tension before he died, although he wrote on it often. Like Dennis, Carter, who was raised in Unitarian Universalist congregation and continues to attend with varying frequency, professes to not believe in an afterlife. As a self-described atheist, he does not believe in a God or higher power, but qualifies his stance on afterlife:

> So once [the body] shuts down, any sense of self also has to go away. Energy still exists, regardless, but I don't know if that's meaningful to talk about as an afterlife if there is no perception of it from that individualistic standpoint. So, if there is no longer any perception or consciousness or processing information in any sort of self-aware way—I don't really consider that an afterlife if all you are talking about is non-conscious energy.

And yet, Melissa and Damon from Unity describe an energy-based afterlife and they believe it is meaningful. The use of "energy" diverges here, with a line drawn between consciousness and nonconsciousness.

"Blending" Afterlives

Although many people commented that they wish that their minister and fellow congregants would talk about death more, they pick up cues from others and from sermons on Sunday. Melissa explains, "I haven't talked to people at Unity about their afterlife beliefs—I do think that a lot of them believe, like I do, that spirit just always is, was, and will be." Damon remembers a particular sermon at Unity that resonated with him because Reverend Martin mentioned that there was life after divorce, life after struggle, and life after death. Damon had recently lost his dog and felt validated and emotional when Reverend Martin affirmed life after death from the pulpit.

Lillian's experience at the Spiritualist Church and her participation in the mediumship coursework demonstrate how her beliefs aligned with Spiritualism's. She feels like they do not really believe in death as a concept and focus instead on life here on Earth and only communicating with those in the afterlife. At the Spiritualist Church, death is a transition, which is constantly expressed from both the pulpit and in conversation. When someone dies, they have "transitioned." I did not hear this same type of language at Unity or the UU Society, but members there also practice a blending of personal and institutional belief.

Carl started attending Unity after a leadership change at the Church of Religious Science—also in Santa Barbara. He attends for the community and the connections to another program he follows. His beliefs about death and afterlife are heavily influenced by A Course in Miracles, which is not affiliated with Unity but whose teachings are incorporated by many.[76] Carl has developed a belief about the continuity of self beyond the ego that comes from A Course in Miracles: "the more you see the ego is just this made-up story that can be changed at any point in time. That there is a part of you that transcends all of that—that the story is held in. And that awareness—you can call it spirit or essence or whatever—that is, that goes on." For many people at Unity, participation in A Course in Miracles or 12-Step Programs supplements the beliefs forged at the institution.

At the UU Society, Carter uses his experience studying philosophy in college and his knowledge of neuroscience to inform his afterlife beliefs. As a self-described atheist, Carter does not believe in a spirit or soul as such, but rather he believes "in free will and internal

[76] "Psychologist Helen Schucman (1909–81) "scribed" the words of an inner voice, which she and her collaborators attributed to Jesus, to produce the best-selling self-study course A Course in Miracles (1976)." It was designed to be a textbook for spiritual transformation. In the introduction, Schucman explains, "this course can therefore be summed up very simply in this way: *Nothing real can be threatened. Nothing unreal exists*" (emphasis in original). (Ann Taves, *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

self, even if it's in flux. But I believe that all those things are kind of based—even if they, through some type of emergence, become more complex than their base components—they're still based on like a physical structure." However, he enjoys attending the UU Society because he believes that ultimately it is more about morals than metaphysics. He likes to be in a group in which he can talk about both. His beliefs are constantly being challenged and nuanced in ongoing conversations at the UU Society. Carter is still in touch with friends from his UU Youth Group, and many of them have what he describes as

> a persistent consciousness belief, which is if I were to lean towards anything other than what I believe it would probably be in that direction, that's what I kind of like—that's what I would like to believe. And I feel like that's probably not too uncommon just because it's kind of—it's spiritual without being dogmatic at all. It's not a big commitment—it can be interpreted in a lot of different ways. So like, it's kind of easy to adopt and fit with other beliefs that you might have about the nature of reality.

While Carter's self-description as an atheist situates him as not believing in God, his beliefs about ontology are more open and fluid, which is how he "qualifies" his atheism. He also discusses how many of his friends and people he knows within his congregation are spiritual without dogma, or SBNR.

While members do draw from sermons or language of other members, they often come into the institution with their own beliefs that are not doctrinally prescribed. Because of the more general nature of afterlife beliefs at the institutional level—the ideas that we must support others in their search, that life continues, that we cannot profess to know, and so forth—it is not required that each aspect of belief be aligned with institutional norms or other members. There was consistency in how individuals talked about afterlife within traditions and even across traditions, but this was not always the case. For instance, Brittney really disagrees about the sanctity of the body after death in a way that no one else at the Spiritualist Church does. She explains that she thinks that the dead body of a person she

loves is important because "there is still a little bit of them in there." In this instance, she was thinking about the death of her mom and a beloved cat. What was telling about Brittney's response is that she also confesses that no one had ever asked her about that before, so she is making up her response from her own opinion. Despite being evoked by an interview question, her response may provide a genuine look into Brittney's gut reaction outside of influence of institution or peers.

"Blending" Death Rituals

Albanese's notion of combinativeness is most evident in the creation and reinforcement of death rituals. My interviewees describe a mixture of rituals that come from a variety of places, drawing from both the current institution they attend and previous institutions for aspects to include and exclude. When asked about their own future services or how they wanted their physical body to be treated, each person had a clear idea of what they wanted done that had been developed through their institutional frame, as well as previous services they had attended and family traditions.

Damon, who attends Unity, expresses that he would not want a funeral or memorial service because he does not like attention in life, so he says he probably would not in death, either. He wants to be cremated, but this comes from his experience with his grandmother and dog: "I never liked the idea of being buried. Being buried seems like you're cold and I just don't like the idea of it. And also, I like that when you're cremated your loved ones can have you right there. Like, my grandma was cremated, and my dog was cremated, and I have them on my dresser." Cremation has become a family tradition. Similarly, Lillian from the Spiritualist Church, who is about the same age as Damon (twenty years old) agrees that she

does not want people making a big deal of it when she died. She also cites her grandmother as an influence in this in that she wanted a small family affair. Furthermore, "I want my body gone immediately. I definitely don't want to be buried; I definitely want to be cremated." Both she and Damon are excited about new kinds of disposition practices, like "making [the ashes] part of the coral reef or make them into a tree."[77] Across traditions, these two people in their early 20s have very similar approaches to death ritual that are influenced largely by family practices, but also personality traits and beliefs about what happens next. In their preferred ritual, Damon and Lillian both affirm that the physical body in its lived form does not play a role in life after death. Yet, both describe physical sensations of discomfort—cold for Damon while Lillian described a more general gut-feeling unease. There is a slight disconnect in what they think they believe to be true and the practices they want enacted based on other kinds of instincts.

Carl of Unity had always thought that he would be buried and have a memorial service because of his Catholic background. Despite having disavowed many Catholic teachings, like the resurrection of the body, he has always leaned toward burial, "but I haven't taken any steps toward that. You know, the truth is in the pudding and in a sense it's what are you acting on." He reflects that he is ultimately "lazy, and cheap," so his services will likely emerge out of that. Doris from the UU Society congregation also commented on

[77] Alternative disposition practices (or practices of disposing of the human body after death) are becoming more popular in the United States due to often being cheaper and more eco-friendly alternatives to burial or cremation. In May 2019, Governor Jay Inslee signed legislation to approve composting as an alternative means of body disposition to burial or cremation. A facility, Recompose, will open in 2020 to facilitate the composting. (see Gene Johnson, "Washington Is 1st State to Allow Composting of Human Bodies," *Associated Press*, May 21, 2019, https://apnews.com/65306ba86c24482baed58e7c0c2e39d7.) Lillian referred to another alternative to cremation and burial, "Eternal Reefs," which "creates artificial reef material out of a mixture of concrete and human cremains (the crushed bone left over from cremations). These heavy concrete orbs are then placed in areas where reefs need restoration, attracting fish and other organisms that turn the remains into an undersea habitat." (Stephanie Pappas, "After Death: 8 Burial Alternatives That Are Going Mainstream," *LiveScience*, September 9, 2011, https://www.livescience.com/15980-death-8-burial-alternatives.html.)

her lack of preparation, despite going through steps with her late husband to fill out forms four years prior about what they wanted done when they died. She is not sure what she wants, as she has seen all of her family members have a plot at the mortuary, but her husband Dennis was cremated. She thinks she is leaning more towards that now, especially after attending several memorial services at the UU Society.

While he was working at hospice, Nathan had a lot of opportunity to think about what he wanted done after his death outside of the Spiritualist tradition. During his training for hospice, there was even an exercise in which he wrote his own eulogy.[78] He wants a blend of what he described as "what the Spiritualist Church does as a remembrance of life" and a more informal setting of the beach with a drum circle. Brittney also talks about taking the idea of a celebration of life and moving it to a more informal setting. She remembers her dad's memorial, which was celebrated in a bar, and how everyone told stories about him.

But not everyone had positive experiences with family members' services. Felicia, who has been attending the Spiritualist Church for about three years, had a negative experience trying to arrange services for her parents. As a result, she prepaid for her cremation so that her remains can be sent home and cremated from anywhere in the world. Felicia recognizes that the services are often for the living, and says, "I would not want my kids or husband or anybody to deal with that stuff, because I didn't like dealing with it and it was not pleasant." And then, unlike Carl, who also grew up Catholic, Felicia is specific in that she does not want anything resembling a Catholic Mass. She does not like that the Mass was not personalized. "Even with my own parents I didn't feel really connected during those services," Felicia explains, "so I didn't get too much meaning out of those." In a celebration

[78] In the eulogy, he said: "Michael passed suddenly but peacefully in his sleep on—and I put in parentheses—(insert date here, date, and place)."

of life, the meaning comes from the individual person rather than the way they fit into a ritual format.

The emphasis on meaning and the shift of focus from the dead body (in a casket, or in the urn) to the life lived and the living is a key part of the way in which my interlocuters think about death. In general, there was much less anxiety about personal salvation—since, if anything, the afterlife will generally be positive—and more thought about helping the living through the grief process at both the institutional and individual levels. The members of these liberal religious traditions welcome the blending of previous experiences, different theologies, and institutional practices. These instances of combinativeness are shaping unique spaces that are both reinforcing and strengthening a particular kind of afterlife belief that is generally positive, developmental, and nothing to fear as well as a death ritual that includes cremation and the shift away from the body as the core of the service.

Institutional Meaning-Making for the Spiritual

At Unity, the UU Society, and the Spiritualist Church, leadership and doctrinal structure fosters individual approaches and beliefs about death rituals and afterlife. My interlocuters describe how they enjoy these liberal religious traditions because they offer a place for exploration and discovery with few strict guidelines.[79] In scholarly literature and lay conversation, there is a lot of discussion about how religious institutions offer support in times of grief or when "death anxiety" rears its head toward the end of life.[80] However, more recent work in psychology demonstrates that it is unclear if "religiosity" is a reliable factor in understanding grief and subsequent meaning-making.[81] It does seem that institutional support plays a role. This section turns to why people start attending liberal religious institutions as well as what role they play in a larger meaning-making process during times of grief and loss.

In the literature, some groups report generally positive associations between religious belief and bereavement. However, in a review completed by Wortmann and Park, they point out that that despite most studies showing positive associations, the results are inconsistent

[79] The most notable exceptions (and hard lines) are the disbelief in hell for Unitarian Universalism and Unity and the disavowal of "bad" spirits at the Spiritualist Church. In conversations I had at the UU Society, several people were critical of evangelical Christianity in general. At Unity, Melissa had been chastened by Reverend Martin for having "too traditional" of a sense of God.

[80] Jong and Halberstadt, *Death Anxiety and Religious Belief*; David B. Feldman, Ian C. Fischer, and Robert A. Gressis, "Does Religious Belief Matter for Grief and Death Anxiety? Experimental Philosophy Meets Psychology of Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53, no. 3 (2016): 531–39; Login George and Crystal Park, "Meaning in Life as Comprehension, Purpose, and Mattering: Toward Integration and New Research Questions," *Review of General Psychology* 20, no. 3 (n.d.): 205–20.

[81] Kelley and Chan, "Assessing the Role of Attachment to God, Meaning, and Religious Coping as Mediators in the Grief Experience"; Crystal Park, "Making Sense of the Meaning Literature: An Integrative Review of Meaning Making and Its Effects on Adjustment to Life Events," *Psychological Bulletin* 136, no. 2 (2010): 257–301.

and vary widely depending in part on how religion or spirituality is measured.[82] In their review, dimensions of "religiosity" include affiliation, attendance, general religiousness (self-rating), belief in an afterlife, composite belief and activities, intrinsic/extrinsic religiousness, religious coping, religious social support, spirituality, and belief in helpfulness of religion, among others.

Other meta-analyses have also shown differences in the conclusions drawn from the sociological surveys. In a small review looking exclusively at studies featuring college students who had lost a loved one within the year, Audrey Hang Hai et al. finds positive associations between religion/spirituality and growth, spiritual well-being, and psychological well-being, but mixed associations with bereavement.[83] The more religious or spiritual people are, the more positive outcomes they have on scales of growth and well-being. However, there are mixed associations with negative bereavement outcomes, such as distress, meaning that being more spiritual or religious does not necessarily decrease distress associated with bereavement. Other groups with larger samples likewise find a mix of positive and negative results.[84] Neimeyer, Wittkowski, and Moser argue that more multidimensional scales and approaches are needed to get a clearer picture of the field.

None of these studies within the grief and meaning-making literature rely on ethnographic methods to determine how people understood the afterlife and participated in

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[82] Jennifer Wortmann and Crystal Park, "Religion and Spirituality in Adjustment Following Bereavement: An Integrative Review," *Death Studies* 32, no. 8 (August 29, 2008): 703–36, https://doi.org/10.1080/07481180802289507.

[83] Audrey Hang Hai et al., "Spirituality/Religiosity's Influence on College Students' Adjustment to Bereavement: A Systematic Review," *Death Studies* 42, no. 8 (2018): 513–20.

[84] Dezutter et al., "The Role of Religion in Death Attitudes"; Robert A. Neimeyer, Joachim Wittkowski, and Richard P. Moser, "Psychological Research on Death Attitudes: An Overview and Evaluation," *Death Studies* 28, no. 4 (2004): 309–40.

death rituals. Instead they use scales to determine levels of religiosity in relation to various grief measures. Wortman and Park suggest that qualitative information can aid in the reconstruction of the meaning-making process for bereaved individuals.[85] It is also valuable to get a sense of how people reconcile afterlife beliefs and understandings of death rituals along a spectrum of loss. Each interviewee was impacted by a previous loss, but perhaps not an immediate one. This is still shaping their relationship with death but would avoid detection in most standard grief studies.

As indicated above, liberal religious institutions are not necessarily the place people turn to as a result of a loss, but they are places in which people who do not align with a particular theology can explore these larger questions. The doctrines and leadership of Unity, the UU Society, and the Spiritualist Church affirm a seeking approach and individual agency. During periods of grief, these institutions offer communal, flexible structures that provide support for meaning-making systems for the otherwise SBNR or unaffiliated.

Why Do People Go?

Although people do not flock to church at the moment of death in the way that many imagine, Reverend Hannah points out that people's movement away from participation in organized religion has created a growing number of people looking for somewhere to go when somebody dies. These people "don't know what to do and they think they should have a service, but they're not Catholic anymore or they don't have a congregation and they're nervous about the theology—there is a reason they're not participating in the traditional congregation." This moment, she says, is when people often recommend the UU Society.

[85] Wortmann and Park, "Religion and Spirituality in Adjustment Following Bereavement."

Reverend Hannah explained that the UU Society hosts many memorial services for people who are not affiliated with the institution itself in addition to members. In this way, the institution is serving the larger community without requiring them to affiliate with the congregation.

Single events like death sometimes also spur people to attend an institution more regularly. At the UU Society, Reverend Hannah explains that "a lot of times people come in after their spouse has died or after their child has died because they are trying to figure out how to make meaning out of their life now." This was an often-echoed sentiment at the Spiritualist Church. Because of the mediumship practice, many people attend the church to receive messages from loved ones, sometimes only attending once, others a few times, or some committing to long-term membership. Nancy, who is a medium-in-training in her seventies, explains that she had come to the Spiritualist Church in 2014 after her mother died at age ninety. She describes her death, which resulted from a fall, as sudden and traumatic and Nancy feels like she did not have the opportunity to say goodbye. She started attending the Spiritualist Church because of the sadness associated with that loss. Similarly, Stan started attending in 2018 following the death of his wife. A friend recommended visiting the church if he wanted to know where she was now. Many of my interviewees, even those involved in Unity and the UU Society, express interest in mediumship as a means of connecting with dead loved ones.

Melissa had several meetings with a professional medium not long after she began attending Unity because her attendance coincided with the death of her father. Despite her conscious belief that he was okay, the medium helped her gain emotional closure and the sense that her father was at peace. The month before her father died, she began attending

Unity because she is in recovery and, as a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, her sponsor suggested that she go to some churches to find a power outside of herself. She attended First Congregational Church (United Church of Christ) and the Spiritualist Church to explore her spirituality and determine if they met her needs for connection. She decided that they did not suit her beliefs because she did not feel anything during the service, but then she saw Reverend Martin giving a sermon on a YouTube video and it spoke to her in light of her desire to think about spiritual development through AA.

While death, either in the form of grief or the desire for ritual, sometimes leads people to attend institutions, it is not necessarily the driving factor. However, once they experience these liberal religious institutions, many people are encouraged by the congregations' openness to seeking answers and exploring spirituality as opposed to promoting set doctrines, beliefs, and rituals. Attendees are working through ways to make meaning in the face of death, and Unity, the UU Society, and the Spiritualist Church offer places of institutional meaning-making for people who may otherwise remain without an institution.

Death in a Meaning-Making Framework

Crystal Park's work has influenced my understanding of meaning-making and how it might be applied to an inquiry into death and religion. My research speaks to the call for qualitative analysis within the grief, death, and meaning-making literature. In 1997, Park and Susan Folkman helped define this dimension of meaning-making by distinguishing between global and situational meaning and suggest that how people cope with stressful situations

depends in part on the relationship between the two frames of meaning.[86] This article provides the basis for Park's later work on meaning-making and her new Global Meaning Violation Scale.

Park and Folkman define meaning in terms of the process of coping with stressful experiences as "perceptions of significance." Religion is an example of global meaning. Global meaning refers to the concepts of general meaning, such as beliefs and goals, while situational meaning refers to the individual interpretation of global meaning considering specific events. In this way, the individual processes events and determines whether they are aligned with their global meaning system or discrepant. If there is a discrepancy, individuals can use different meaning-making processes to determine how the event can be reconfigured or if the global meaning must be changed to accommodate the event. Each situation provides an opportunity for the global meaning to be reinforced, challenged, or modified. Park and Folkman define meaning-making as the eventual integration of situational and global meaning following a series of cognitive appraisals of events and scenarios. Death can be one of the most disruptive kinds of situations through which one must make meaning.

The fear of death, which can also create discrepancies between situational meaning and global meaning, is one of the anxieties addressed within the meaning-making literature. For some of my interviewees, their participation in these seeking communities has mitigated a fear of death, even in the face of death of friends or family. Brittney, who has attended many funerals and memorial services in the past few years, is not worried about her own death because of her experience communicating with spirits. "I love it here," she qualifies, "I love this life of mine. I'm in no hurry to leave, but no, I don't fear it at all." Nathan, another

[86] Crystal Park and Susan Folkman, "Meaning in the Context of Stress and Coping," *Review of General Psychology* 1, no. 2 (1997): 115–44.

member of the Spiritualist Church, also affirms this and says the afterlife "is something to look forward to." He comes from a background in which hell was a reality, but he has since reconciled that into a new global meaning framework that does not include hell and death subsequently is not a source of fear.

Stan, who began attending the Spiritualist Church following the death of his wife, say that he has received several spirit communications from her that have given him a sense of purpose in his life now. Before attending, he was neither spiritual nor religious, but now describes the Spiritualist Church and himself as SBNR. He found his spirituality in response to his wife's death but needed the flexibility of Spiritualism to come to terms with it. He needed to be able to slowly shape his global meaning system around the new events he was experiencing. Felicia also required this flexibility in the way she makes sense of death. Becoming a medium changed her perspective on death "somewhat, but not as much as you might think because I already had very strong core beliefs...but I feel like what I already believed was sort of enhanced and filled out." The Spiritualist Church is the place she can think through these big questions in her own framework. Similarly, Melissa was searching for support and truth when she joined Unity, but she loves that she can develop her own beliefs—incorporating what works and declining what does not.

Melissa's interview—along with several other interviews—was rich with a recognition of the meaning-making work she was engaging in. When she describes meeting with a professional medium after her father's death, she expresses a conscious decision to remain skeptical in the encounter in that she "did not tell the medium my last name, I just texted her...I wanted her to have as little information [as possible]." She says that she really wanted to communicate with her dad, and she wanted it to be a genuine experience.

However, she was still was doubtful, even during our interview, even though "the experience was really powerful and completely real to me, but my brain still goes 'I don't know.'" The meaningfulness of the experience did not diminish in the face of skepticism, and this echoed Lillian's experience of communication with spirits. Even now, as she continues her training in mediumship at the Spiritualist Church, "I still have doubts sometimes. I know it sounds weird, but I still sometimes think, maybe I'm making all this up. But at the end of the day I really have fallen in love with it so much that even if it's all fake, I don't really care." The meaning comes from a place of community and friendship, not necessarily "the ability to talk to dead people."

The awareness that my interlocuters have about their active role in encountering, evaluating, and reincorporating instances of situational meaning into a global meaning framework also demonstrates a kind of "reflexive spirituality." Originally coined by Wade Clark Roof, Kelly Besecke has used this term to describe the way in which people who identify as SBNR actively explore their spirituality.[87] Besecke later points out that liberal religious institutions are homes to these practices, which is evident in my ethnographic work.[88] Both reflexive spirituality and the meaning-making constructs are another way to view how my interlocuters are thinking through afterlife beliefs and death rituals in their religiously liberal institutions. Throughout many stages of grief and moments where meaning or truth is questioned, these institutions offer a community that provides support for the meaning-making process.

[87] Kelly Besecke, "Speaking of Meaning in Modernity: Reflexive Spirituality as a Cultural Resource," *Sociology of Religion* 62, no. 3 (2001): 365–81.

[88] Kelly Besecke, "Beyond Literalism: Reflexive Spirituality and Religious Meaning," in *Everyday Religion Observing Modern Religious Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Is Dying What Matters?

I returned to Doris' home a couple of weeks after my interview with her because she wanted to share Dennis' writing with me. He knew he was going to die, and soon, so he wrote about it extensively. In one essay he wrote:

> A Christian asks me: 'Don't you know that if you believe in Jesus, you'll not perish but have everlasting life?' That idea is valuable for people who have miserable life circumstances, so that they have hope for something better in the future. But my wife and I have lived through the best of times, and we realize that the process is the substance of life. We have had the good fortune to meet our challenges and receive favorable results. We will be survived by our offspring, students, and other young people. To go on living forever with no needs, challenges, or worries would be more like punishment than reward. My mortal life has been a satisfying process, which I hope to complete without becoming incompetent. I do not fear death as much as I fear the demise of my quality of life.

Dennis was clear with his family: he valued a life well-lived over living for the sake of it. And this is true for many of the people from Unity, the UU Society, and the Spiritualist Church. Each person expressed the unknowability of afterlife, often to avoid contradictions or suffering.

Unity, the UU Society, and the Spiritualist Church are places in which doing well in this life is valued, and each promote a flexibility around beliefs and practices from the institutional level on down. Members recognize that a tenet of their membership is an openness to seeking and respecting the beliefs of others. Likewise, leadership in these institutions encourage and reinforce individual prerogative over any theological constraint. Instead, especially with respect to death and afterlife, they allow much interpretation and exploration. Only the Spiritualist Church has a clear guideline for members: that life continues after death. But the nature of this continuation is dependent upon who you ask.

Each of these institutions of American religious liberalism provides places for those who are seeking—sometimes called the nonreligious or the SBNR or the unaffiliated—to

explore afterlife beliefs and death rituals in a structured framework. They can use both their personal sense of meaning, which they can easily combine with the looser guidelines of the institution into a global meaning system, to work through these big questions. In this way, each person takes what they need and leaves what does not resonate with them. Although all the people I spent time with had a nuanced view of their own beliefs and preferences, there is a shared sentiment among them that the next life is generally unknowable. But many, like Dennis, see immense value in doing good in this life for the sake of it.

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